

DECISION NOTICE

Project :

Fort Connah Black powder and Archery Range Construction

Prepared By:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks

March 10, 2006

I. Proposal

The proposed range is on the Flathead Indian Reservation located between St. Ignatius and Ronan, Montana. A portion of the SW ¼ NW ¼ of Section 13, Township 19 North, Range 20 West, P.M.M.

The project is for Black Powder & Archery Range Construction: 100 meter range, six station covered line with shooting benches, concrete base with a log storage shed. Minimal facilities are required for a primitive range such as planned at Fort Connah.

II. Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA)

MEPA required FWP to assess the potential consequences of this proposed action for the human and natural environment. The proposal was detailed in a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) completed by FWP September 9, 2005. The comment period for this EA ended November 25, 2005 and extended through January 26, 2006.

Issues raised during the public comment period on the EA are addressed in the Comments section of this Decision Notice. The Draft EA and Decision Notice will serve as the final document.

III. Summary of Public Comment

As of November 25, FWP had received written comments from one nearby landowner outlining a series of concerns. No other comments were received. The issues outlined in the letters (summarized in bold italics) and corresponding responses by FWP are presented as follows:

The overall range plan was to excavate a back stop and shooting lane to accommodate up to 6 shooting stations and then make other improvements such as covered shooting positions, targets, a storage shed and fences. These other improvements are what was requested for funding from FWP and are the objective of the environmental assessment.

Other issues relating to whether there is a range or not, and the location of that range, are often pertinent and important as to whether FWP should use public funds to continue. Since some of the questions received here, seem to be more at issue with the source of other funds and the location of the range, those issues may be more appropriately handled by the tribal, county or other local authorities, zoning boards, etc. If these proposed actions were denied and the no action alternative were selected, there would still be a shooting range, as the minimum needed for this range are the backstops which are done and which were not funded by FWP. Consequently some of these concerns would remain unchanged.

Specific actions proposed and being evaluated by this EA are:

Proposed Projects: Concrete Slab for shooting lane, a log storage shed, roofing the shed and firing line, benches, jack leg log rail fences, and targets. The jack leg fence and shed will be rail and log, in keeping with the rustic and historic period concept.

Addressing Specific Comments and Concerns:

1) This project will detract from the historic character of the Fort Connah site. Blackpowder rifle firing and new construction is incompatible with the tranquil setting of this important site.

Response: This project is being sponsored and implemented by the Fort Connah Restoration Society who have direct responsibility for the historic conservation and preservation of this site. The planned shooting range, for 6 shooting positions, will only be used by traditional muzzleloaders and archery, which are in keeping with the history of the area. This 18-acre parcel is also separate from the 4-acre parcel containing the actually restored historical fort site. Additionally they anticipate that this project will increase the interest and involvement in both shooting historical weapons but also increased historic interest in the area and specifically in Fort Connah.

2) This facility will increase the volume of vehicle traffic entering and exiting Highway 93. This development is incompatible with the planned highway redesign that is of critical importance to the safety and well being of people traveling Highway 93. Any major facility for recreation that is not dependent on a particular location should be located with access points at major intersections or from town sites. This project does not fulfill this requirement.

Response: The Fort Connah Restoration Society went through the appropriate MT Department of Transportation's public hearing process and obtained a Driveway and Approach Application and Permit. This was completed on January 26, 2006 and gives access from the range to highway 93. The Project # is F 63(5).

3) This firing range is located several hundred yards from Post Creek and residential dwellings. The Post Creek riparian zone is an important travel corridor for grizzly bears and other wildlife. The Blackpowder firing range is also incompatible to these interests.

Response: Tribal environmental office has been aware of the project and its relationship to Post Creek, and they have been on site. Consequently, after their visit they issued a permit for a culvert to drain the site under the access road. We received comments from both the Region 2 FWP biologist and the Confederated Salish Kootenai tribe's biologist that grizzly and bald eagles are in the area but they did not believe that there will be any adverse impacts upon these (threatened and endangered) species. The actual firing range is set back to the furthest side of the 18 acre parcel from inhabited areas. This site and its range design meets the safety criteria for proximity to inhabited residences.

4) I find the use of Coal Trust funds for this project to be an inappropriate use of these monies. I suspect many tribal members of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes will also have misgivings about the expenditure of tribal assets to further this project.

Response: Your concerns about the use of the coal tax money are not part of this EA. This grant money was allocated for purchase of the 18 acres from "Coal-Tax" money in the Montana Cultural Trust. Allocation of Coal Tax money falls under other requirements and procedures outside of the jurisdiction of FWP and purchase of the parcel was not a part of this EA. This grant money was then matched by the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes. There was also a matching grant through Flathead Community Development for the Restoration Society. This money was then used by the Fort Connah Restoration Society who has responsibility for the site, and for the matching funds for the development of this proposal. A little over two years ago a public scoping meeting was held to inform the public of the proposed action and to solicit feedback for the proposal. At that time, nearly 100 people made it known that they were interested in aiding this project. There were no objections voiced to the proposal at that time. In the interim, the proposed range and the subsequent granting of the coal tax money, matching money from the tribes and Flathead Community Development are all a matter of record within those organizations. Consequently, this proposed project was pursued. Concerns over the use of funds for this project should be directed to the tribal government and Flathead Community Development.

5) This proposal does not further the best interests of residents of the Mission Valley or the people of Montana. I strongly urge your agency to reconsider its support for this project. I also request that your agency extend the public comment period now that the scope of the final project is known.

Response: Again a public meeting was held, a little over 2 years ago to inform the public of the proposed action and to solicit feedback for the proposal. At that time, nearly 100 people made it known that they were interested in aiding this project. There were no objections voiced to the proposal at that time. Additionally, this project has public knowledge on all or portions of the project, as the public has had opportunities to

participate at various levels that had to be approved within the community. Any significant community opposition to the project has not been evident. The comment period was extended in order for Fort Connah Restoration Society to go through the appropriate MT Department of Transportation's public hearing process to obtain a Driveway and Approach Application and Permit.

IV. Modifications to the Environmental Assessment

Based on the public comments received, modifications to the Draft EA are deemed to be unnecessary.

V. Decision

After review of the proposal and the corresponding comments, it is my decision to proceed with providing funding through the Shooting Range Development Grant program. The action will enhance safe shooting opportunities

I find there to be no significant impacts associated with this action and conclude that an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. The completed EA and the response to comments included in this Decision Notice are an appropriate level of analysis.

Kurt Cunningham
MT Shooting Range Development Program Coordinator